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THE BLADE
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MARKETPLACE

News

Environment | Article published November 30, 2001

Lake Erie water level could fall

Winds, cold of December can speed evaporation

By [TOM HENRY](#)
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Already the lowest it's been since the mid-1960s, Lake Erie has received little long-term benefit from this week's rainfall and could be in for a real beating next month if the region snaps out of this pattern of unseasonably mild weather too quickly.

Mid- to late-December is often the most critical time of the year for the Great Lakes in terms of evaporation.

That's when the difference between air and water temperatures is usually the greatest, according to one of the region's top authorities on global warming.

Dr. Peter Sousounis, a Michigan State University researcher who was chairman of a 35-member global warming task force commissioned by the White House, explained that the lakes need several weeks to adjust to seasonal changes.

The worst scenario is having bone-chilling air masses move over the lakes while the water is still in the process of cooling down. That causes the lakes to be under the greatest stress and evaporate even faster than in the middle of summer, especially because strong, sustained winds are often thrown into the mix this time of year, he said.

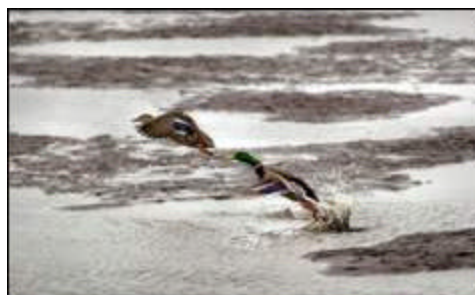
"It all depends how quickly cold air moves in," Dr. Sousounis, an MSU associate geography professor, said.

Area marina operators continue to be nervous. Joe Ihnat, co-owner of Anchor's Away Marina Corp. in Marblehead, said he is "hoping with all my heart that all the upper lakes really get hit with snow this winter."

Researchers at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Great Lakes laboratory in Ann Arbor have determined that Lake Erie is nearly 6.7 inches below normal for this time of year.

The lab is predicting a mixed blessing for the winter: Colder-than-normal temperatures but normal precipitation.

That could be OK if the cold air doesn't settle in too quickly, in the sense that the lakes should eventually freeze and seal off evaporation.



Ducks near Cedar Point find the shallow lake ideal for taking off. A scholar says the worst threat to levels would be the arrival of bone-chilling air while the water is still cooling off. (THE BLADE/ALLAN DETRICH)

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But, as NOAA researchers point out, normal amounts of rain and snow will not make up for what the lakes have lost in recent years. Therefore, next summer's forecast for boating isn't much better.

Cynthia Sellinger, NOAA hydrologist, noted that spring runoff from melting snow - one of the biggest sources of replenishment - has been below normal for at least three years.

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